

# On the distinctive educational value of philosophy

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# On the distinctive educational value of philosophy

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## Abstract

Should philosophy be a compulsory subject in schools? I take it as read that philosophy has general educational value: like other academic disciplines, it cultivates a range of intellectual virtues in those who study it. But that may not be a good enough reason to add it to the roster of established school subjects. The claim I defend in this article is that philosophy also has *distinctive* educational value: there are philosophical problems that feature prominently and pressingly in ordinary human lives and that all children should be equipped by their education to tackle. Among these are the problems of justifying subscription to moral, political and religious standards. The significance of these problems for everyone is sufficient to warrant the inclusion of philosophy in the school curriculum.

## Key words

curriculum; educational value; justification; moral standards; philosophy; subscription

## Introduction

Should philosophy be a compulsory subject in schools? That is to say, should it be part of the core curriculum provided to all children in an education system, as distinct from an elective or extracurricular activity provided only to those who choose it? Are the benefits conferred by philosophy on those who study it such that it deserves to be considered a universal educational entitlement?

I make two assumptions about philosophy that are pertinent to this question but insufficient to settle it. First, I assume that philosophy can be taught to children of all ages in ways that allow them to make genuine progress. It is obviously true that seven-year-olds are ill-equipped to cope with undergraduate level philosophy, just as they are ill-equipped to cope with undergraduate level maths or history. But, like maths and history, philosophy is a form of inquiry in which it is possible to engage at

different levels and with different degrees of sophistication. As fledgling mathematicians begin with arithmetic operations and fledgling historians with autobiographical timelines, so fledgling philosophers can start with the meanings of words. I have argued elsewhere (Hand 2008) that the techniques of conceptual analysis, by which philosophers map the conceptual terrain given in ordinary language, place no greater cognitive demands on children than the methods of mathematical and historical inquiry routinely found on primary school curricula. Moreover, the 50-year history and global reach of the Philosophy for Children movement amply demonstrates that teaching philosophy in schools, across the age range, is a feasible proposition.

Second, I assume that philosophy confers general intellectual benefits on those who study it. The benefits I have in mind here are the ones conferred by training in any academic discipline. Sustained participation in disciplined theoretical inquiry cultivates in children a range of dispositions conducive to the assessment of evidence and the estimation of truth. Sometimes described as the intellectual virtues, these dispositions include curiosity, attentiveness, rigour, open-mindedness, tenacity and intellectual courage. As JS Mill argues, it is because truth is so useful to us, and because we are by nature so poor at estimating it, that the cultivation of the intellectual virtues is a central educational task:

Our direct perceptions of truth are so limited; we know so few things by immediate intuition, or, as it used to be called, by simple apprehension – that we depend for almost all our valuable knowledge, on evidence external to itself; and most of us are very unsafe hands at estimating evidence, where an appeal cannot be made to actual eyesight. The intellectual part of our education has nothing more important to do, than to correct or mitigate this almost universal infirmity. (Mill 1867, p. 23)

Philosophy is at least as effective as the other academic disciplines when it comes to mitigating this infirmity. Teaching children philosophy is one way of equipping them to think clearly, reason carefully and estimate truth well.

I take it as read, then, that philosophy can be taught to children of all ages and that doing so improves the quality of their thinking. These facts suffice to show that the inclusion of philosophy in school curricula is perfectly respectable: there is educational merit in initiating children into the practice of philosophy. But they do not amount to a good argument for making philosophy a compulsory school subject. Philosophy may be accessible and educationally beneficial to children, but so are a great many other activities, practices and disciplines. And, while cultivating the

intellectual virtues is an educational aim of considerable importance, philosophy is only one of a number of academic disciplines through which these dispositions can be fostered. Indeed, Mill thinks it is maths and the physical sciences that equip people most effectively for the ascertainment of truth:

The processes by which truth is attained, reasoning and observation, have been carried to their greatest known perfection in the physical sciences ... Mathematics, and its application to astronomy and natural philosophy, are the most complete example of the discovery of truths by reasoning; experimental science, of their discovery by direct observation ... It is by the study of these, then, that we may hope to qualify ourselves for distinguishing truth, in cases where there do not exist the same ready means of verification. (Mill 1867, pp. 22-23)

We need not follow Mill in according maths and the physical sciences a special status with respect to the general aim of improving children's thinking: it is by no means clear that history, philosophy and the social sciences are less effective in realising this aim. But, by the same token, it would be bold to claim and difficult to show that philosophy does a *better* job of promoting attentive, rigorous and tenacious thinking than other academic subjects. It seems clear that disciplined theoretical inquiry in any domain requires the acquisition and exercise of the intellectual virtues.

If we think it matters that children become proficient assessors of evidence and estimators of truth, we should certainly favour school curricula that make room for academic subjects (though not necessarily curricula that are dominated by them). But we do not yet have a reason for thinking that philosophy should belong to the set of academic subjects schools teach. A set that happened to exclude philosophy would do just as well.

And, of course, as things stand, in most of the English-speaking world, the set of academic subjects schools teach *does* exclude philosophy. While this empirical fact about existing school curricula carries no justificatory weight, it underlines the point that a case for compulsory philosophy will have to invoke more than teachability and general intellectual benefit. If educational policy-makers and practitioners are to be persuaded that philosophy should be added to the roster of established school subjects, they must be shown that it does more than cultivate the intellectual virtues. They must be shown that philosophy has some *distinctive educational value*, a kind of educational value different from and additional to the kind it shares with the other academic disciplines. That is the case I hope to make in what follows.

## The problems of philosophy

Philosophers tackle particular kinds of problem and develop particular forms of argument and analysis to solve them. Initiating children into philosophy is a matter of interesting them in these kinds of problem and acquainting them with these forms of argument and analysis. If there are specific benefits of initiation into philosophy, as opposed to the generic benefits of initiation into any academic discipline, they must lie in the significance of philosophical problems and the value of knowing how to tackle them.

When should we say that problems and the means of tackling them deserve a place on the core curriculum provided to all children? No doubt there are several answers to this question, but here is one of them: children should be equipped by their education to deal effectively with at least those problems that feature prominently and pressingly in ordinary human lives. It is the task of education to prepare children for adult life and, while adult lives differ widely in the directions they take and the challenges they throw up, there are at least some problems, or kinds of problem, with which more or less all adults must contend at some point or other. Whatever else we might want to put on the core curriculum, inescapable problems and the means of tackling them surely belong there.

This point may be granted readily enough, but at first sight it perhaps seems an unpromising platform on which to erect an argument for philosophy in schools. For, whatever significance the problems of philosophy may have, it is by no means self-evident that they feature prominently and pressingly in ordinary human lives. To the contrary, they are often thought to feature only marginally and inconsequentially, intriguing, to be sure, but largely incidental to the conduct of human affairs. Philosophy can look a lot like a pastime of the idle rich: for people of leisure with an analytical turn of mind, wrestling with paradoxes and untangling linguistic knots may serve well to while away the long winter hours; but what is that to people of limited means or a more practical temper?

It is not much help here to point out, as defenders of philosophy in schools are wont to do, that children naturally and spontaneously ask philosophical questions. It is quite true that children sometimes ask questions like 'How can we be sure that everything is not a dream?' and 'Which part of me is really me?' (the examples are from Gareth Matthews's book *Philosophy and the Young Child*), and these questions are undoubtedly philosophical in character. But the fact that children occasionally stumble on philosophical problems does not show that the problems are either inescapable or urgent. Children ask a great many questions, of varying degrees of

intelligibility, answerability, authenticity and importance, and not all of them matter enough to shape the content of the school curriculum. Perhaps their philosophical questions *do* matter enough, but this would have to be shown, not assumed. And Matthews' examples do not inspire much confidence: most adults, it seems fair to say, are untroubled by the warrant for believing they are not dreaming, or by the location of the self, and *not* because they have satisfactorily answered these questions by means of philosophical analysis. They are untroubled because these are questions one can easily set aside without obvious detriment to the pursuit of one's goals or the conduct of one's life.

It is, moreover, easy to exaggerate the enthusiasm of children for tackling philosophical problems. While it can be thrilling to discover for the first time the puzzles and paradoxes that provide the impetus for philosophical work, the work itself is often arduous and unsettling. It is easy to see what makes the dream argument such an intriguing epistemological challenge, but extraordinarily difficult to make progress in answering it. The temptation to throw up one's arms in despair and turn one's attention to something more tractable can be hard to resist. John White suggests that children's appetite for serious philosophical inquiry is not nearly as strong as it is sometimes made out to be:

To judge from my own personal experience of children, they are quite likely, even the most intellectually lively of them, to want to put a rapid end to the discomfort of thinking about such headbreaking matters. (White 1992, p. 81)

That children independently discover and wonder about philosophical problems does not make them central to human life in the way we are looking for. Problems that can be, and tend to be, set aside without consequence when thinking about them becomes difficult are not the sort of problems children must be equipped by their education to solve. The question is whether it can be shown that the problems of philosophy are not, after all, so easily or inconsequentially set aside.

I see very little prospect of showing this for philosophical problems *per se*. The plain fact is that many philosophical problems *are* peripheral to people's ordinary practical concerns. Consider, for example, the substantial corpus of philosophical work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century dedicated to solving the problem of what Gilbert Ryle calls 'systematically misleading expressions' (Ryle 1931). According to Ryle, many expressions have grammatical forms that are incongruent with the logical forms of the facts they record and a central task of philosophy is to effect 'transmutations of syntax' to remove these incongruities. He elaborates as follows:

There are many expressions which occur in non-philosophical discourse which, though perfectly clearly understood by those who use them and those who hear or read them, are nevertheless couched in grammatical or syntactical forms which are in a demonstrable way *improper* to the states of affairs which they record (or the alleged states of affairs which they profess to record). Such expressions can be reformulated and for philosophy but *not* for non-philosophical discourse must be reformulated into expressions of which the syntactical form is proper to the facts recorded (or the alleged facts alleged to be recorded). (Ryle 1931, pp. 142-143)

Estimations of the value of philosophical work in this vein vary, but even its most fervent supporters recognise that the task of reformulating systematically misleading expressions is a *technical* one, necessary for the avoidance of error in metaphysical inquiries but quite unnecessary for the ordinary purposes of linguistic communication. As Ryle says, the expressions in question, however logically improper they may be, are 'perfectly clearly understood by those who use them and those who hear or read them'. The problem posed by systematically misleading expressions is not one that worries, or should worry, most of the people who use them.

It would be a mistake, then, to contend that *all* philosophical problems, or philosophical problems per se, are central to human life. Fortunately, this is a stronger contention than we need for present purposes. To make the case for compulsory philosophy in schools it will suffice to show that there is a *significant subset* of philosophical problems that are urgent and inescapable for human beings. It will not matter that some philosophical problems are marginal to the ordinary business of living if there are others so central to it that everyone stands to benefit from understanding them and knowing how to tackle them.

The suggestion that philosophical problems can be divided into those that are marginal and those that are central to human life echoes a suggestion made by Bertrand Russell in his essay 'Philosophy for laymen' (Russell, 1995 [1946]). Russell defends the idea that everyone should study philosophy, but proposes that 'the philosophy that should be a part of general education is not the same thing as the philosophy of specialists' (p. 33). He continues:

Not only in philosophy, but in all branches of academic study, there is a distinction between what has cultural value and what is only of professional interest ... [T]he men who devote their lives to philosophy must consider questions that the general educated public does right to ignore, such as the

differences between the theory of universals in Aquinas and in Duns Scotus, or the characteristics that a language must have if it is to be able, without falling into nonsense, to say things about itself. Such questions belong to the technical aspects of philosophy, and their discussion cannot form part of its contribution to general culture. (pp. 33-34)

In some ways Russell's formulation of the distinction is infelicitous. It does not seem quite right to say that the philosophy suitable for laypeople is a *different thing* from the philosophy practised by specialists, or to describe the former but not the latter as having *cultural value*. What does and does not have cultural value is a vexed question, but it is implausible to suppose that philosophical work on problems marginal to everyday life must lack this property. Nevertheless, the basic point stands: many philosophical problems are such that most people have no need to attend to them, so, if a case is to be made for a universal educational entitlement to philosophy, it must rest on the claim that there are at least some philosophical problems with which more or less everyone must contend.

I think that there *is* a significant subset of philosophical problems that feature prominently and pressingly in ordinary human lives. I shall not attempt to delimit the full range of problems in this class; instead I shall identify just one cluster of problems whose significance for everyone I take to be sufficient on its own to warrant the introduction of compulsory philosophy in schools. The problems I have in mind here are those of *justifying subscription to moral, political and religious standards*. Let me first make some general remarks about subscription to standards and its justification, before turning to the particular importance of, and justificatory challenges presented by, subscription to moral, political and religious standards.

### **Justifying subscription to standards**

One of the things human beings do is hold themselves, and sometimes each other, to standards or norms of conduct. We follow rules, obey laws, adhere to principles and comply with policies. In some cases, such as New Year's resolutions, adoption of a standard is a deliberate and dateable event and adherence to it requires continual motivational effort and regular self-reminders of one's reasons for subscribing. In other cases, such as rules of subject-verb agreement in one's first language, adoption is a gradual and subconscious process and subsequent adherence comes quite naturally, without need of effort or reminders, and even without the ability to formulate the rules one is following. Typically, perhaps, if it is possible to generalise



over such a large and diverse class, subscription to standards falls somewhere between these poles: the rules we follow in our day-to-day lives soon become second nature to us, so that compliance requires no special effort; but from time to time, when action contrary to our standards appears to promise some benefit or advantage, we find it helpful to remind ourselves, if not of our reasons for subscribing, then at least of the fact that we subscribe.

Standards come in many shapes and sizes. Some are trivial (pour the milk before the tea); others momentous (love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind). Some are precise (exercise for thirty minutes three times a week); others vague (do the right thing). Some are specific to particular activities or contexts (drive on the left); others are quite general, applying to all activities in all contexts (live in the moment). Some are epistemic (proportion your beliefs to the evidence), some grammatical (don't split infinitives), some medical (take two tablets at bedtime), some horticultural (plant spring-flowering bulbs in the autumn).

Subscription to a standard is, to borrow David Copp's term, a 'syndrome' of attitudes and dispositions (Copp 1995, p. 85). It is at once conative, affective and behavioural. A person who subscribes to a standard characteristically intends to comply with it, feels good about complying with it and bad about failing to comply with it, and habitually does comply with it. Intentions, feelings and habits often line up in this way. Many people intend to exercise for thirty minutes three times a week, successfully stick to the regime, are pleased with themselves for sticking to it, and feel guilty about taking a week off. Similarly, those charged with remembering to take medication at bedtime typically try to remember, do remember, are glad to have remembered, and feel annoyed when they forget. These are pure or paradigmatic cases of subscription to a standard.

Sometimes intentions, feelings and habits do not line up so neatly. I may deliberately and routinely pour the milk before the tea, but feel neither good about compliance nor bad about non-compliance because the standard is not sufficiently important to me. I may have a habit of avoiding split infinitives in the absence of an intention to avoid them: perhaps I gave up the intention on hearing the arguments of grammarians for abandoning the rule, but have never managed to shake off the habit. And most of us make any number of New Year's resolutions that we intend to keep and feel bad about failing to keep, but that we never acquire anything resembling a tendency to keep. In these cases, where some but not all of the criteria for

subscription are satisfied, we might prefer to speak of partial subscription, or of subscription in an attenuated sense.

Subscription to standards is conative, affective and behavioural, but it is not cognitive. It does not involve knowing, believing or judging that anything is the case. Standards are not, and do not entail, propositions, so subscription to them is not, and does not entail, assent to propositions. A standard, remarks Copp, is 'anything that is expressible by an imperative' (1995, p. 20), and it is in the semantics of imperatives that standards are at home:

The notion of a standard is needed in the semantics of imperational sentences that express commands, such as 'Shut the door'. Just as the corresponding indicative sentence expresses the proposition that you will shut the door, this sentence expresses the command (for you) *to* shut the door. The command specifies that the addressee is to shut the door, it is something the addressee can conform to and comply with, and it is not a proposition. Hence, it is a standard. (Copp 1995, p. 20)

A standard specifies something to be done and the person who subscribes to it commits herself to doing the thing specified. Her commitment consists in a syndrome of intentions, feelings and habits, but not in a set of beliefs about the thing to be done or the reasons for doing it. She may have such beliefs, of course, and they may be related in important ways to her subscription to the standard, but they are not integral to it.

The idea of subscription to standards is, I hope, a familiar and intuitive one. We are rule-following creatures: all of us intentionally and habitually act in accordance with rules, norms and principles. And we frequently care enough about the rules we follow to take pride in complying with them and feel guilty about our failures to comply.

It always makes sense to ask of a standard to which one subscribes, or to which one is thinking about subscribing, whether subscription is justified. What counts as an adequate justification will be different for standards of different kinds. Where a standard is an arbitrary convention the function of which is to coordinate behaviour in a social group, for example, what justifies subscription to it is precisely the fact that it has currency in the group in question. I subscribe to the standard 'drive on the left' for the very good reason that everyone else in my country of residence subscribes to that standard too. By contrast, I subscribe to the standard 'plant spring-flowering bulbs in the autumn' because I know that spring-flowering bulbs require a

sustained dormant period of cold temperatures to stimulate root development. Whether this horticultural standard happens to be current in a social group is quite irrelevant to the justification for subscribing to it.

Subscription to a given standard is either justified or unjustified. It either enjoys the support of a sound justificatory argument or it does not. If it does, and I am acquainted with and persuaded by the argument, I have a warranted belief that it is justified. If it does not, and I am acquainted with and persuaded by the sound objections to attempted justifications, I have a warranted belief that it is unjustified. If I find myself unable to assess the soundness of a justificatory argument, or I know there are attempted justifications I have yet to consider, it will be rational for me to remain agnostic about whether or not subscription to the standard is justified.

As with beliefs of other kinds, the beliefs people hold about the justificatory status of their standards are often unwarranted. People who think there is good reason to avoid splitting infinitives are mistaken; so, according to George Orwell, are people who think there is good reason to pour the milk before the tea (Orwell 1946). Of course, these particular mistakes do not much matter, because the standards in question are trivial. But it is easy to think of standards for which unwarranted justificatory beliefs are more harmful. Consider the standard 'take two tablets at bedtime'. If one's reason for adhering to this standard is that the course of treatment has been prescribed by a trusted and qualified medical practitioner, all well and good. But suppose one adheres to it on the authority of a homeopath, or a herbalist, or an elderly relative convinced that the cure for every ailment is a daily dose of cod liver oil. In these cases one has no warrant for believing the standard to be justified, and the likely consequence of believing it is a steady worsening of the medical condition one is trying to treat.

As the foregoing examples make clear, and notwithstanding the ease with which people form unwarranted justificatory beliefs, many standards are such that justifying subscription to them is a straightforward matter. The good reasons I have for holding myself to standards like 'drive on the left', 'plant spring-flowering bulbs in the autumn' and 'take two tablets at bedtime' are readily accessible to me, and assessable by me, without need of specific educational preparation. But this is not always the case. Other standards are such that justifying subscription to them is very far from straightforward. And, unfortunately, among the standards that are most difficult to justify are those to which we cleave with the greatest passion and whose implications for our lives are the farthest reaching. Moral, political and religious standards have just this character.

**Moral, political and religious standards**

My contention that the problems of justifying subscription to moral, political and religious standards are sufficient to warrant compulsory philosophy in schools rests on two claims: (i) that these problems are urgent and inescapable for human beings, and (ii) that it is difficult to make much progress with them without access to distinctively philosophical forms of argument and analysis.

I think the first of these claims is uncontentious. Almost all of us subscribe to moral and political standards of one kind or another, and many of us subscribe to religious standards too. Our moral, political and religious standards characteristically matter a great deal to us: they are central to our identity and they routinely trump our other commitments and inclinations when demands conflict. Our subscription to them not only sets the tone and tempo of our own lives, but also bears in significant ways on the lives of those around us—those with whom we exchange goods, make contracts, form relationships or build communities, or who are otherwise affected by our actions, decisions and attitudes.

And while we typically do not choose the set of moral, political and religious standards to which our subscription is cultivated as children, we *are* confronted with choices about whether to keep up our subscription to them, and about whether to add new ones. We are frequently exhorted to adopt moral, political and religious standards different from our own and, even in the absence of exhortation, we can hardly fail to notice the diverse range of standards to which people hold themselves in plural societies. Presented with these choices and alternatives, we cannot avoid asking ourselves whether we are justified in subscribing to the standards we do in the spheres of morality, politics and religion, and whether there are other standards to which we should subscribe as well or instead.

The second claim, about the difficulty of answering such questions without access to philosophical forms of argument and analysis, is perhaps more controversial. Here it will be helpful to separate out the three kinds of standard we are considering.

I take a standard to be *moral* when a person's subscription to it is universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing; that is, when she wants and expects everyone to comply with it and supports some kind of punishment for non-compliance (Hand 2014, 2018). As Mill observes, 'the real turning point of the distinction between morality and simple expediency' is that, in calling something morally wrong, 'we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it;

if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience' (Mill 1962 [1861], p. 303). Sometimes we make it our business to police not only our own compliance with a standard but everyone else's too, and in these cases our subscription to the standard is properly described as moral.

Universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to standards is difficult to justify because it is so intrusive on other people's lives. It is one thing to hold myself to a standard because compliance with it furthers some end I have; it is quite another to hold others to a standard because I think they ought to have the end compliance furthers – or, worse, because *their* compliance furthers *my* end. What could entitle me to expect others to comply with my standards, or to penalise them for not doing so? It is easy to see that arguments adequate to the task of justifying subscription to moral standards will need to be of an unusual kind; but not at all easy to see, at least for the philosophically uninitiated, what such arguments might look like.

Fortunately, there is a long tradition of philosophical reflection on this problem and a substantial repository of philosophical arguments and analyses with which to tackle it. Among the most powerful of these arguments is that morality is needed to ameliorate what Copp calls the 'problem of sociality' (Copp 2009, p. 22). Because of some contingent but permanent features of the human condition—rough equality, limited sympathy, moderate scarcity of resources—human social groups have a standing propensity to outbreaks of conflict and breakdowns in cooperation. But conflict can be averted and cooperation sustained if we hold ourselves and each other to some basic standards of conduct: to prohibitions on killing and causing harm, stealing and extorting, lying and cheating, and to requirements to treat others fairly, keep one's promises and help those in need. We all have an interest in safety and social stability, so we all have good reason to police our own and others' compliance with these standards. I do not suggest, of course, that most questions about the content and justification of morality have been satisfactorily answered. The point, rather, is that acquaintance with philosophy shows children how progress can be made with these questions. It shows that there are considerations of at least the right kind to justify subscription to moral standards, and that these considerations support some candidate standards much better than others. It puts people in a position to make informed, rational judgments about whether to retain or give up their existing moral standards and whether to accept or reject new ones; and this is vastly preferable to leaving them intellectually paralysed by moral diversity, or

sceptical about the prospects of distinguishing between good and bad reasons in the moral domain.

A *political* standard is one that pertains to or arises from membership of a polity. Political standards may or may not be moral ones, depending on whether subscription to them is universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing: if I hold myself to the standard 'vote in elections', but do not mind about the voting habits of others, my standard is political but not moral. We can distinguish between two basic kinds of political standard: those compliance with which is expected and enforced by the state (e.g. obey the law; pay taxes; tolerate religious diversity); and those to which citizens may choose, but are not expected, to subscribe (e.g. vote Conservative; campaign for the environment; protest against inequality).

Notwithstanding the quantity of philosophical ink that has been spilt on the problem of political obligation, the difficulty of justifying subscription to political standards of the first kind is perhaps not acute, at least in reasonably just and democratic polities. There are, after all, strong and self-evident prudential reasons for complying with standards backed by the coercive power of the state. The question of whether or not there are good independent reasons of tacit consent or fair play for obedience to the law is theoretically important, but not one on which it is necessary for everyone to form a view. For most of us, it is political standards of the second kind that present the greater justificatory challenge. What sort of reasons do we need for throwing our weight behind one political party, cause or policy rather than another? The difficulty of this question lies in the fact that, where our support helps to bring it about that a party is elected or a policy enacted, the consequences are borne by everyone, including supporters of rival parties and contrary policies. This is a parallel difficulty to the one of justifying subscription to moral standards: there, the problem was the direct imposition of one's standards on others; here, it is the imposition on others of the political outcomes one's standards are designed to achieve.

Again, philosophy has deep resources on which those wrestling with these matters can draw. Think, for example, of John Rawls' proposal for working out the basic political arrangements whose imposition on everyone we are entitled to support (Rawls 1971). His suggestion was that we imagine ourselves behind a 'veil of ignorance' such that, while we have quite extensive knowledge of society, we do not know anything about our own position in it. We do not know our class or status, our intelligence or strength, our religion or sexuality; so our political judgment is undistorted by considerations of personal circumstance. Given that there must be basic political arrangements, and that maintaining them will involve the exercise of

coercive power, we must choose them in a way that is fair to everyone—and the fairest way to choose is from behind the veil of ignorance. Rawls has many critics, and this is by no means the only way to think about problems of justification in the political domain; but it is an argument of the sort needed, and of a sort depressingly absent from mainstream political debate. By acquainting them with such arguments, philosophy promises to equip children and young people with the wherewithal to make intelligent, critical assessments of their own and others' reasons for subscribing to political standards.

Finally, a *religious* standard is one that pertains to or arises from a (perceived) relationship with the divine. As with political standards, subscription to religious standards may or may not be moral. There is also an overlap between the categories of religion and politics: 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's' is a standard that both arises from a (perceived) relationship with the divine and pertains to membership of a polity. Many people who hold religious beliefs subscribe to standards of conduct they take to be either laid down by a divine being or inspired by acquaintance with one. The supposedly divine source of religious standards leads some people to subscribe to them very stringently, and to give them priority over other standards and reasons for action.

The problems of justification in the religious domain are severe. For one thing, it is highly controversial that there exists anything answering to the description 'the divine'. For another, even if there is a divine being, it is unclear how we might establish that any of the injunctions recorded in religious texts were laid down by, or inspired by acquaintance with, that being. But let us assume for a moment that these problems can be solved. There remains a yet more difficult justificatory challenge: that of explaining why divine commands ought to be obeyed. Wherein lies the authority of religious standards? Is the thought that those who comply with divine commands are afforded special protection from harm—but then what of the evidence that the lives of the faithful are no more trouble-free than those of the faithless? Or is the thought that compliance with divine commands is good or valuable in some other way—but then in *what* way, exactly?

These, too, are questions to which philosophers have given a great deal of attention, and with which significant progress has been made. The progress lies not so much in the provision of definitive answers—though, arguably, at least some religious beliefs have been rendered untenable by philosophical criticism—as in the mapping of possible answers and the tracing of their logical implications. So, famously, the Euthyphro dilemma identifies an ambiguity that must be resolved by anyone

tempted to think that what justifies subscription to divinely ordained standards is their goodness. One option is to suppose that God requires us to do certain things because they are (independently) good: in this case the fact that standards are divinely ordained is properly speaking incidental to whatever reasons there may be for subscribing to them. It may therefore be doubted that they are *religious* standards at all. The other option is to suppose that certain things are good by virtue of the fact that God requires us to do them: in this case the fact that standards are divinely ordained is the only reason advanced for subscribing to them and the assertion of goodness does no justificatory work. Here it remains to be shown why divine ordination should be considered a reason at all. Plainly this clarification of options does not settle the question of whether subscription to God-given standards is justified, but it does help believer and non-believer alike to assess the bearing on that question of their purported goodness. In the sphere of religion, as in the spheres of morality and politics, philosophical arguments and analyses assist us in getting to grips with problems of justification and thinking through the reasons we have for the standards to which we subscribe. Given the unreflective ways in which many children are socialised into fairly restrictive religious beliefs and practices, it is perhaps especially important that schools give them the tools to interrogate and revise their standards in the religious domain.

## Conclusion

In sum: there are philosophical problems that feature prominently and pressingly in ordinary human lives, among them the problems of justifying subscription to moral, political and religious standards; preparing children for adult life involves equipping them to deal effectively with these problems; so philosophy should be a compulsory school subject.

Of course, once we have a compelling reason to put philosophy on the curriculum, the door is open to the exploration in schools of any and all philosophical problems – including the ones we might think of as avoidable, inconsequential or marginal to practical affairs. In particular, it will make sense to take seriously the philosophical questions children spontaneously raise, to build on the things they are naturally curious about and show them how progress can be made with the conceptual and metaphysical puzzles they encounter. Questions like ‘How can we be sure that everything is not a dream?’ and ‘Which part of me is really me?’ are certainly back in the frame.



Still, the foregoing argument plainly implies that philosophical problems of the prominent and pressing variety ought to have a privileged place in any school philosophy programme. I have not attempted to delimit the range of problems in this class, so nor shall I attempt to rank the branches of philosophy by educational importance. But if I am right about the problems of justifying subscription to moral, political and religious standards, it follows that moral philosophy, political philosophy and philosophy of religion should be among the branches that receive the closest and most sustained attention in schools.

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